

(April 9, 2007) Congressman Lipinski Testified Before IL House Committee on Railroad Safety

Congressman Daniel Lipinski

Testimony Before the

Illinois General Assembly

House Committee on Railroad Safety

Hearing on "Federal Government Activities on Rail"

Bridgeview, Illinois

April 9, 2007

Chairperson Nekritz, Representative Moffitt, and members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to speak on federal initiatives concerning rail transportation, and thank you for holding this hearing in the Third Congressional District. I would also like to take this opportunity to commend Mayor Steve Landek for his leadership, and to thank him and the people of Bridgeview for their hospitality in hosting this hearing.

Since I was first elected in 2004, transportation has been a top priority for me. In the last Congress I secured over \$125 million for critical transportation projects in the SAFETEA-LU bill, a multi-billion dollar highway and transit funding bill that was signed into law in 2005. With my appointment this year to the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, I am in a position to deliver even more for the Third District and Chicagoland in the next funding bill that is scheduled to be completed in two years.

As you know, I have led the effort in Washington to help fund the Chicago Regional Environmental and Transportation Efficiency program, also known as CREATE. I worked very closely with my colleague and good friend, Congressman Jim Oberstar, Chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, to include \$100 million for the CREATE program in SAFETEA-LU. As with all the other funding in this bill, these funds were directed to the Illinois Department of Transportation for administration. I would note that former IDOT Secretary Tim Martin and current IDOT Acting Secretary Milt Sees have done outstanding jobs in administering these funds despite a challenging budgetary climate.

As one of only 25 congressionally designated "Projects of National and Regional Significance," and with one of the largest funding levels among these projects, CREATE is indeed in a special category.

Why were we able to garner this special designation and the significant funding for CREATE when there were so many competing projects across the country and limited federal funds?

The reason is simple. Chicagoland has been the dominant rail hub in North America for over a century and today remains the busiest rail freight gateway in the United States; so whatever happens here, affects the economy of the entire nation. The Chicago region must manage the challenging task of handling more than 37,500 rail cars per day. But unfortunately, we have a 21st century economy running on a 19th century rail system.

Because of the antiquated system, Chicago has become a bottleneck for freight rail moving across our country, causing days of freight delay and stifling economic growth and productivity. And there are other substantial and direct impacts to the public - Metra delays, Amtrak delays, and blocked road crossings. These all impact the quality of life for commuters across the region. The most obvious improvement under CREATE will be the completion of grade separations that will prevent the obstruction of roads by rail traffic at 25 critical junctions across the area. We all have experienced the frustration of being stopped by a train as we are commuting; these grade separations will save time, save fuel, lower pollution, and improve safety.

This is why we must complete CREATE; to allow Chicagoland to stay competitive in the increasingly global economy and to improve the quality of life for local residents.

With a project of this level of complexity and with a diverse group of key stakeholders, the challenges involved in implementing CREATE were not unexpected. I am pleased that the freight railroads, IDOT, CDOT, and Metra have made significant progress in spite of these challenges. The 3-year, \$330 million plan, which we announced last September, is testament to how far we have come in negotiating a proposal to fund the first significant phase of CREATE. I was joined at the announcement by Democratic Congressman - and new Committee Chairman - Jim Oberstar, Republican Congressman - and former Committee Vice-Chairman - Tom Petri, Administrator Joe Boardman of the Federal Railroad Administration, Commissioner Frank Mulvey of the Surface Transportation Board, and other state and local officials. The participation of all these officials underscores the broad support that CREATE enjoys and further demonstrates the commitment and cooperation that have been the hallmarks of the CREATE program.

There is no debate here. We all know how important CREATE is. That is why I am so committed to working with our CREATE partners to lead our efforts in Congress. However, nearly two years after the funding was secured, the CREATE program is at a critical juncture.

SAFETEA-LU is set to expire at the end of Fiscal Year 2009, and congressional hearings on the next funding bill will begin next year. In recent hearings we have seen that the Highway Trust Fund that provides money for the projects in these bills is running low. With this increasing budgetary pressure, Congress may take a close, hard look at funds from projects in SAFETEA-LU that have not been spent. If there are significant federal funds that are still "left on the table" by the time of the next reauthorization bill, Congress may act to move those funds to other critical transportation projects.

Even if this does not happen, without substantial progress on CREATE, it will be difficult to build on past successes and garner more funding for this critical project in the next surface transportation bill. Clearly, we must continue to work together to move CREATE forward in an expeditious manner. I will continue my commitment to leading this progress, but we must all work together.

Again, I would like to thank the Committee for inviting me to testify today. Living in the Chicagoland area, especially in the Third District, we are constantly reminded of the expanse of the rail system. I passed over countless tracks as I traveled here today. But the critical importance of the rail network to our local economy and to the national economy often is overlooked. Fixing the local rail system through the CREATE program will do so much to spur our economy and improve our quality of life. Few projects can provide such great benefits. Thank you again for holding this hearing to highlight such a critical transportation issue.